

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CAPTAIN ROBERT MCKENNA, U.S. NAVY, COMMANDING OFFICER, MARITIME CIVIL AFFAIRS GROUP, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM LITTLE CREEK, VIRGINIA TIME: 1:00 P.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, AUGUST 8, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): All right. I believe we're ready when the captain is.

CAPT. MCKENNA: (To staff.) Are we on?

STAFF: Yes. Yes, we're on.

CAPT. MCKENNA: And it's Jack?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir.

CAPT. MCKENNA: Hi, Jack. Captain Bob McKenna here. I'm -- I am the current commander of the Maritime Civil Affairs Group here at Little Creek. MR. HOLT: Okay. Well, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable, Captain McKenna, and thanks for joining us today. Have you got an opening statement for us, or --

CAPT. MCKENNA: Yeah, I have some opening comments. And let me -- right up front let me just say that I've been here for three months. I'm a temporary commander filling in the gap between a gentleman who left here about three months ago and his scheduled relief, who comes in in September. So I came in about two years after this command stood up. And let me just set some of the history, if I could, real quick.

About two and a half years ago the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command stood up, under Rear Admiral Don Bullard. And they stood up this command for many reasons. One of them was to address some gaps and build some new capabilities that we would need for the 21st century. Another was to kind of take some of the load from the Army and the Marine Corps in the current long war, and we've been able to do that. And another was to give an advocate -- a flag advocate, two-star advocate, for the Navy's expeditionary forces, which were growing, in the budgeting and the manning, training and equipping processes.

So I think this command has been very successful. The Navy Expeditionary Combat Command has been very successful in the last two and a half years in meeting those needs and those requirements.

So, just real quick background on NECC, because I'm not sure if the bloggers out there are familiar with who we are, but NECC was originally the

Seabees; the Explosive Ordnance Disposal forces; the Navy Coastal Warfare forces, and they mainly do harbor and port security-type missions, maritime security; and the Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group, and they are mainly the cargo-handling forces. They go to foreign ports, like Kuwait, for instance, and off-load the U.S. military ships and maritime prepositioning ships.

So to that mix over the last two and a half years we've added the Navy's riverine force and the Maritime Civil Affairs Group and the Expeditionary Training Command. And just recently the National Defense Strategy -- the 2008 National Defense Strategy came out and started talking about what's now being called soft power. And we've really been -- I mean, we stood up these commands two and a half years ago, two years ago, with that in mind.

So before this National Defense Strategy even hit the streets, we've been thinking about soft power here. Maritime Civil Affairs Group is a large component of that, obviously. And we stood up in July of 2006 and there were four people on board; and those four people were three Navy reservists, a captain and a couple of Navy Reserve sailors, and a contractor who was a retired Army Civil Affairs colonel who was going to lend some expertise to what we were trying to do.

The Navy, as you all probably know, never has had a civil affairs force in the past, although Admiral Bullard liked to say we'd been in the business for a long time, because for a long time they've been doing community relations projects in places all around the globe. We used to do West African training cruises, UNITAS cruises in south America, other type -- same type of mission in Southeast Asia, and obviously, disaster relief all over the world.

The difference is that in the past we've done that kind of as an ad hoc type of thing, and with not a whole lot of planning, background or thought to a strategy for doing the right things. So, sometimes what happened in the past was we'd build a schoolhouse -- and I'm not saying that this is necessarily Navy Civil Affairs, but community relations-type projects done by the U.S. military.

Maybe a schoolhouse was built without any thought to who was going to attend the school, who the teachers were going to be, how they were going to have a budget to maintain the teaching materials that they needed. So the effect of building that schoolhouse was kind of lost. So now what we're doing is, instead of doing this in an ad hoc nature, we're building a force that understands civil affairs and understands effects-based operations and works closely with the combatant commanders and the Navy component commanders, and in some cases Joint Task Force commanders, to support what they're trying to do.

And so some thought is going into this. You know, where should a schoolhouse go? Who are the students going to be? Where are they going to come from? Who are the teachers going to be? Where is the budget going to come from, so it actually 10 years from now is actually still serving a purpose? And it all fits in with our operational goals and our strategic goals.

So what we've done in the last two years is, we've built training for this force. And we've done that with the assistance of the Army, because they've had a large Civil Affairs force for many years. We've done it with a partnership with Old Dominion University, to help teach us some language and cultural expertise.

We've done it with some contractors, who are in a lot of cases retired Army Civil Affairs personnel and some retired Navy personnel. And then we've done it with a partnership with the Marine Corps, because they're trying to improve their Civil Affairs force now also. So they're working with us on making our course curriculum more formal.

So in two years, we went from, as I mentioned before, four people to a year ago deploying a Maritime Civil Affairs team as part of Global Fleet Station and to just recently we have forces deployed in Southeast Asia.

We have a force -- we have a team in Africa. We have planners with the Navy Special Warfare group in Iraq and another one who's working in Africa and Europe. We have teams that have just returned from Pacific Partnership with USNS Mercy. We have another team that just departed with USS Kearsarge, to do Continuing Promise in Central America and in the Caribbean.

And we have another team that just departed to go to Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa. And they're going over there to do a 45-day pre-deployment site survey, in preparation for a commitment where we'll send two teams in December for a six-month deployment, to work Maritime Civil Affairs in East Africa. And then starting next June, we'll have three teams going on a recurring basis.

So the force is growing fairly rapidly. It's been kind of a difficult row to hoe, because we have no experience in Civil Affairs. So we're taking sailors on three-year orders, most of whom are coming from shifts before they get here, and telling them, okay, you're going to become a Civil Affairs generalist. And then you're going to go out and deploy and you're going to represent the combatant commander or the Navy component commander, whoever our operational commander is, and be kind of the Civil Affairs expert.

So the training has been built. And it's about a six-month pipeline before they become a team.

And then they go out the door and do a couple of deployments, and then they turn around and go back to a ship for their next tour.

So it's been challenging, but I think it's going as well as can be expected, and we're getting kudos from around the Navy and from the other services also.

MR. HOLT: All right. All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And interesting stuff there. Got a -- I've got a few questions as well. But let's get started this time with Jim Dolbow with the Unofficial U.S. Coast Guard Blog. Jim, are you with us?

Q Yes. Hi, Captain. Thanks so much. What's your relationship, if any, with the U.S. Coast Guard?

CAPT. MCKENNA: Well, nothing right now, to tell you the truth. And we have another command within NECC, and I mentioned it in my opening remarks, the Expeditionary Training Command, who works fairly closely with the International Training Division from Yorktown. And they do somewhat similar mission, in that they go overseas and train foreign navies, foreign coast guards in maritime security-related areas. And they -- in part, to stand up, they worked very closely with the International Training Division, because they were kind of the

pros from Dover at the time. And we still have a lot to learn from them, and we'll continue to work very closely with them.

There's potential in the future for us at Maritime Civil Affairs Group to combine with the Expeditionary Training Command to work kind of hand in hand on developing better partnerships and alliances, and helping them -- you know, the foreign navies, for instance, to become better partners in this long war and to help make them more secure and stable. So there's potential in the future for all of us to work together with the Coast Guard.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Grim.

Q Yes, sir. I knew a Navy captain, Donald McMahon, with the 3rd Civil Affairs Battalion in Iraq. They were with MND-C. Was that part of your organization, or is that a separate track to accomplish civil affairs using Navy Reservists, in his case, personnel? CAPT. MCKENNA: Yeah, and that's -- first of all, I want to say I'm familiar with your blog, and I enjoy it. I read it pretty often.

What's happened in the past probably four years or so is Navy Reservists, as individual augmentees and sometimes as -- in lieu of forces, have been pulled into the civil affairs arena to do Provincial Reconstruction Teams or to augment Army civil affairs battalions or other commands. And we've tried to tap into that experience, actually, and bring some of those Reservists who have that experience working in Iraq and Afghanistan -- bringing them into the Reserve units that are part of the Maritime Civil Affairs Group. So I don't know the man you're talking about, but I'm sure that's what his involvement was.

Q All right. Well, then I have a second follow-up question, which is that -- you've talked a bit about what you do with the other services.

Do you have any interagency involvement with the State Department or would you like to tell us a bit about that?

CAPT. MCKENNA: Yeah, actually. And that's probably a good segue for me to discuss what -- we just finished a three-day symposium, the first annual Maritime Civil Affairs Group symposium, where we brought in individuals from interagency; from nongovernmental organizations -- so from the State Department, from USAID, from CARE, from a couple other NGOs -- and I can't remember the names of them off the top of my head; from all the services, so we had Army CA personnel; we had Marine CA. We had people from Old Dominion University and from the combatant commands and from the Navy component commanders.

And so we brought them all together because we're so new and we have to establish relationships with all those people. We have to let them know what we're trying to do and how we want to work with them and so we're reaching out to them. And then we also gave them an opportunity to brief what they do and how they feel about how -- you know, how they can interact with the military to achieve common goals.

So it was three days of give-and-take and idea sharing. We actually -- we broke up into working groups for a full day and had people from all those different organizations in three different working groups. And one of the goals

was to help us put together an OPTASK maritime civil affairs to further develop our concept of operations and just to continue to develop and improve our force.

So we are -- we're working alongside those groups in different exercises and operations including Continuing Promise and Pacific Partnership and Africa Partnership Station, but we're also reaching to academia and to these interagencies to try to ask them to help us become better.

Q Thank you, Captain.

CAPT. MCKENNA: Sure.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir. All right. And this is Jack. I've got just a quick question for you here. Does it -- it sounds to me like the -- that the MCAG is going to kind of become the umbrella organization for all the things that the Navy had been doing previously for, you know, for example, the missions of the USNS Mercy, as well as the Pacific Partnerships and the Continuing Promise operations. Is that the plan? CAPT. MCKENNA: It is. And that's really been our focus of effort for the last year, is to be involved in these engagement-type missions. And there's -- we're learning lessons along the way. And, you know, one of them is we really need to get out in front with the Navy component commanders and others who are setting up these missions and make sure we get out and market our skills and tell them, here's how we can help you with this -- with this operation or this mission.

The next part about it is, we need to get out, to not deploy on the ship and then just be there as soon as we pull into port but we need to be out way ahead of the ship so we can establish some of those relationships that we need and we can liaison with civil authorities there. And we can find out where they need help and where we can give help, and help to develop some of the projects that the ship will be working on, when they get into port, whether it be medical or dental or construction. And that seems to be going very well.

I mean, we had I wouldn't say a rough start, but we had a less than resounding success last year in Global Fleet Station, because it was kind of a last-minute thing. You know, we jumped in and said we'd like to participate.

So since then, we've adjusted a little bit. And we get out way ahead. We're involved in the initial planning conferences and then jump out like, for instance, in the Pacific Partnership thing, we had two teams out there working with the USNS Mercy. And they were leapfrogging ahead and going to the ports ahead of the ship. And that seems to have worked out very well.

Commodore Kearns, who is the mission commander -- I think he's DESRON 21 or DESRON 31, excuse me -- on the Mercy, seems to be pleased with what we're doing for him out there. So that's good. I mean, two years into our existence and probably barely into the walking stage and, I think, we're already doing good things out there and all over the world.

MR. HOLT: Well, it sounds like it, from things that I was reading on the USNS Mercy's captain's log or the blog that he's been putting out.

Any other follow-up questions.

Q This is Jim. I have one.

MR. HOLT: Sure, Jim. Go ahead.

Q Speaking of community relations projects, do you have any good winning-the-hearts-and-minds stories you can share with us?

(Cross talk.)

CAPT. MCKENNA: If you can -- can you hold on for just a minute? I can have someone come in and tell you a good one. Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right.

(Cross talk.)

While we're waiting here just a second, Grim, do you have any follow-ups right offhand?

Q No. I was interested in the idea that there might be multiple tracks of trying to figure out this question. If you have anything more that you would like to say about the different tracks, I certainly would like to hear it. I don't have any specific questions.

(Cross talk.)

CAPT. MCKENNA: Sorry to hold you up on that.

MR. HOLT: That's all right.

CAPT. MCKENNA: I just wasn't prepared but I've got my operations officer here, Lieutenant Commander Leon Jablow. And he's been here for quite a bit longer than I have. And he can relate a good story for you.

Go ahead, Leon.

LT. CMDR. LEON JABLOW: Hello.

MR. HOLT: Hello.

LT. CMDR. JABLOW: Hello. Good -- a good story for you. The -- we recently had a team deployed with the African Partnership Station. Are you familiar with what that is?

Q Yeah.

LT. CMDR. JABLOW: Okay. We had a team deployed there, and the team had gotten broken up -- they were working both in Ghana and in Liberia. And when our team was in Liberia, there were two personnel working out of there. And there was -- the APS -- I guess I'll call it the APS footprint, the Navy footprint, was bringing in about 96 pallets of material for a hospital. And the hospital out there was built back in the '60s. It was the John F. Kennedy Hospital, built by his administration. And it had fallen into disrepair. And there was an NGO there called Project HOPE. And they were really coordinating, trying to redevelop this hospital and put it together. They had found out about the APS folks bringing in these pallets, but there really wasn't a need to make that happen, to get those pallets of supplies to the hospital site, which was -- I don't want to say deep inland, because it really wasn't. It was only a few miles from the coast. But if you've ever been to Liberia, there's no way to get there. (Laughter.)

So what these two young -- and they were two young petty officers, a first class petty officer and a second class petty officer. What they did was they got involved with the military group at the embassy, the Ministry of Health in Liberia itself, the Project HOPE coordinator and then the hospital director, and they arranged transportation of all that material from the port when the ships came in to the hospital. And they did that by working with the U.N., which has a(n) advisory group out there. They worked with the U.N. to get trucks contracted to bring that material over.

So in the end, it was just two of our younger sailors who really put that together and made that project a big success. And I'm happy to say that that hospital's now up and running. It was up and running before, but now it's running at a higher capacity and dealing with maternity and neonatal care. Q Well, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

LT. CMDR. JABLOW: Okay.

CAPT. MCKENNA: Thanks, Leon.

MR. HOLT: Captain, as we were -- as you were mentioning, there were some different tracks that you were looking at building into the program. So do you have -- can you expand on that a little bit? Can you tell us a little bit more about those tracks?

CAPT. MCKENNA: Gee, I'm not sure -- I'm not sure I understand the question, Jack. Different --

STAFF: Tracks.

MR. HOLT: Well, you know, the different areas in which you're working through civil affairs.

STAFF: (Inaudible.)

CAPT. MCKENNA: Oh. You know -- are you talking about maybe the functional areas that we're --

MR. HOLT: Yes.

CAPT. MCKENNA: -- that we're specializing in?

MR. HOLT: Yes.

CAPT. MCKENNA: Well, I can tell you, what we've done in developing Maritime Civil Affairs is -- the first thing we did was -- I think I mentioned this before -- we reached out to the Army civil affairs folks down at Fort Bragg and we asked them to share some of their curriculum with us.

And one of the things that they shared was I think it's 16 functional areas that are -- that really form the basis of civil affairs-type work. And those fall into four different categories: economic, governance, security and essential services. And there's 16 different topics within those categories.

So we're teaching all of those to our -- to our civil affairs teams and that's part of making them civil affairs generalists, because we can't make experts, obviously, in 16 different areas. So they know enough about those areas to be able to go out and do a good assessment. And then, if they need expertise, they call back to -- they have a reach-back capability to here, to my group staff, to get functional expertise in some of those areas.

But on top of those functional areas, to make this a maritime civil affairs capability, we've added some maritime-specific functional areas, including port operations, harbor and channel construction and maintenance and marine and fisheries resources.

Now, once again, what we're doing here -- we're bringing in sailors mainly from ships, some from subs and others from aviation squadrons and we're saying, okay, you've got six months to become adept at this civil affairs business. And included in that training is some expeditionary, on-the-ground type training. You know, these are shipboard sailors for the most part, so they don't know how to set up a tent and wear this camouflage uniform and handle a weapon in case they have to go into a non-permissive type environment. So we send them to four weeks of expeditionary combat skills training. So there's a month.

They need some language and culture training. And the way we've handled that is our Maritime Civil Affairs Squadrons are regionally aligned and regionally exposed. So the East Coast guys don't have to learn PACOM-type languages and cultures and history and the West Coast guys don't have to learn about Africa and South America, for instance, so that we don't have to teach them, you know, Spanish -- they don't have to spend a year learning a language, for instance. And then we're also teaching them tactical languages.

But anyway, that culture and language training takes up another month or six weeks or so, and then they get this civil affairs training. And the best we can do is make them generalists and not experts. And that's what the Army does also.

So these maritime areas -- port operations, harbor and channel construction and maintenance, marines and fisheries resources -- they learn just enough about those so they can do proper assessments in ports. And that's how we -- that's how we become a maritime civil affairs group.

So those are the areas that we're teaching. In order to build a professional force, you really need -- you know, for a long time you really need more than -- a sailor for more than just three years. So I think that this capability is largely going to be built for the meantime on the shoulders of our reserve force, which makes up about half of our teams.

And the reason that I think we'll be able to tap into the reserve sailor as a resource is because a lot of them do this type of stuff in their civilian occupation, for one, but they also are not limited to two-year tours or three-year tours. If they want to come into the civil affairs field in the reserve side of the house, they can stay for five years, or 10 years, even, as long as there's room for advancement and promotion. So we're working that right now in order to build a professional force.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Excellent. I know we're running a little short of time here. Do you have any closing comments for us, closing thoughts?

CAPT. MCKENNA: I've probably already made my closing comment. But let me just say -- and I've already said this, but the Navy wanted to establish this capability quickly because we needed to. I mean, we needed to apply some soft power and needed to get off the ground quickly. We couldn't tap into civil affairs experience, so what we tapped into, once again -- and I think Lieutenant Commander Jablow's story kind of attests to this fact -- was what the Navy does have an abundance of, and that's enthusiasm and a can-do spirit.

And we've taken sailors from all walks of life, and they came into something that was so completely out of their comfort zone, really, but they've responded very well. And they've -- the sailors here at this group and the sailors at the two squadrons have really embraced this new Navy capability. And most of them that you talk to wish that it was around for a longer time and wish that they could stay for longer than just a tour or two.

So I think that there is a lot of area for potential growth here, and I think over the next five to 10 years you're going to see this force grow and become more widely known and more widely used, and it's going to become a strong force for our national defense. Even though, you know, as we like to say, it is soft power, it's very important. And as Secretary Gates has said recently, I think he's elevated preventing wars to the level of winning wars. So that's our business, and I think you're going to see us do it very well over the next several years.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much, sir. Appreciate you being with us for the Bloggers Roundtable today. And hopefully, we can catch up again soon.

CAPT. MCKENNA: Okay. Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

END.